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WASHINGTON TALK

Briefing

No Longer a Secret

One of the secrets of the Carter Administration was its decision to slip agents of the Central Intelligence Agency into Iran cloaked as foreign journalists. Now the secret is out, not because of any leaks among the few former White House officials and members of Congress who knew about the mission, but because former President Jimmy Carter himself has disclosed it in his memoirs, "Keeping the Faith."

The agents, disguised as members of a photo-documentary team from an English-speaking country, which reliable sources have identified as Canada, infiltrated into Iran in advance of the abortive attempt to rescue the American hostages. This covert operation was personally approved by Mr. Carter, who had issued stringent new guidelines against the use of journalistic cover for American intelligence work.

After the fact, Mr. Carter informed both the House and Senate intelligence committees about the use of the journalistic guise for American agents who moved freely in and out of Tehran in the weeks before the rescue attempt. Even after Mr. Carter's disclosure of this piece of classified information, some of his former advisers still regard the matter as too sensitive to discuss.

"Whatever was done was in keeping with the imperatives of national security and existing regulations," said Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was President Carter's national security adviser. "For obvious reasons," he added, "I can't comment further."

Providing intelligence agents with journalistic credentials has for years been a concern among members of the nation's news organizations. Even the use of a foreign press credentials by C.I.A. agents, as was the case in the Iran mission, tends to reinforce suspicions in some parts of the world that reporters could be involved in intelligence gathering.

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